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ABSTRACT

Raymond William's historical analysis of the "community" and the "individual" is useful for looking critically at the notion of "discourse communities." Recent "social" theories of writing have invoked the idea of community in ways that seem at once sweeping and vague, for they fail to state the operating rules or boundaries of such communities. These theories about the power of social forces in writing are clearly needed in a field that has focused primarily on the writer as an individual, but they do pose some problems. First, they offer a view of academic discourse that is oddly lacking in conflict or change. Second, they present that discourse as almost wholly foreign to many students, raising questions not only about their chances of ever learning to use such an alien tongue, but of why they should do so in the first place. Finally, they tend to polarize talk about writing. One of the most pressing tasks for writing theory is to form what Williams calls a "positive opposing" term for discourse community, one that will allow us to view writers as social individuals--as persons who are not only acted upon by the social discourses of which they are part, but who can act to resist and change the demands of those discourses as well. (Sixteen references are appended.) (MS)

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Community: A Keyword in the Teaching of Writing

A paper presented to
The Conference on College Composition and Communication
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Abstract

This paper uses insights offered by Raymond Williams in *Keywords* as the starting point for a critical look at the notion of "discourse communities." Recent "social" theories of writing have invoked the idea of community in ways that seem at once sweeping and vague--positing what Mary Louise Pratt has called "unified discursive utopias" that direct and determine the writings of their members, while failing to state the operating rules or boundaries of such communities.

While such theories about the power of social forces in writing are clearly needed in a field that has focused primarily on the writer as an idividual, they pose some real problems. First, they offer a view of academic discourse that is oddly lacking in conflict or change. Second, they present that discourse as almost wholly foreign to many of our students, raising questions not only about their chances of ever learning to use such an alien tongue, but of why we should want them to do so in the first place. And, finally, they tend to polarize our talk about writing: One seems asked to defend either the power of the discourse comunity or the imagination of the individual writer.

It is in this context that Williams' work can be of help, particularly his historical analyses of the key terms "community" and "individual." One of the most pressing tasks for writing theory is to form what Williams calls a "positive opposing" term for discourse community, one that will allow us to view writers as social individuals--as persons, that is, who are not only acted upon by the social discourses of which they are part, but who can act to resist and change the demands of those discourses as well.

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COMMUNITY: A KEYWORD IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING

by Joseph Harris, Drexel University

A paper presented to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, MO, March 1988

The word *community* is much used these days in our talk about writing and the teaching of writing. What I would like to do here is to trace some of those uses in order to get a sense of the kinds of beliefs and arguments that lie behind them.

Before I do so, though, I would like to note some of the reasons why I am drawn to this particular issue and to the stand I will take on it. In *The Country and the City,* Raymond Williams writes of how, after a boyhood in a Welsh village, he came to the city, to Cambridge, only then to hear "from townsmen, academics, an influential version of what country life, country literature, really meant: a prepared and persuasive cultural history" (6). This odd double movement, this irony, in which one only begins to understand the place one has come from through the act of leaving it, proved to be one of the shaping forces of Williams's career--so that, some 40 years after having first gone down to Cambridge, he was still to ask himself: "Where do I stand . . . in another country or in this valuing city" (6)?

A similar irony, I think, describes my own relations to the university. I was raised in a working-class home in Philadelphia, but it was only when I went away to college that I heard the term *working-class* used or began to think of myself as part of it. Of course by then I no longer was quite part of it, or at least no longer wholly or simply part of it, but I had also been at

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college long enough to realize that my relations to it were similarly ambiguous--that here too was a community whose values and interests I could in part share but to some degree would always feel separate from.

This sense of difference, of overlap, of tense plurality, of being at once part of several communities and yet never wholly or simply a member of one, has accompanied nearly all the work and study I have done at the university. So when, in the past few years, a number of teachers and theorists of writing began to talk about the idea of *community* as somehow central to our work, I was drawn to what was said.

In looking at their uses of *community* I will take both my method and theme from Raymond Williams in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Williams's approach in this vocabulary reverses that of the dictionary-writer. For rather than trying to define and fix the meanings of the words he discusses, to clear up the many ambiguities involved with them, Williams instead tries to sketch "a history and complexity of meanings" (15), to show how and why the meanings of certain words--*art, criticism, culture, history, literature* and the like--are still being contested. Certainly *community,* at once so vague and suggestive, is such a word too, and I will begin, then, with what Williams has to say about it:

> **Community** can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization *(state, nation, society,* etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term (66).

There seem to me two warnings here. The first is that, since it has no "positive opposing term," *community* can soon become an empty and sentimental word. And it is easy enough to point to such uses in the study of writing, particularly in the many recent calls to transform the classroom into "a community of interested readers," to recast academic disciplines as "communities of knowledgeable peers," or to translate standards of correctness into "the expectations of the academic community." In such cases, *community* tends to mean little more than a nicer, friendlier, fuzzier version of what came before.

But I think Williams is also hinting at the extraordinary rhetorical power one can gain by invoking *community*. Richard Ohmann has remarked on how the pronoun *we* is often used as "a systematically misleading expression" (311)--as in "*We* must stand firm against the continuing Communist threat in Nicaragua." One can use *community* in much the same way, to invoke a collectivity that may or may not be there. For instance:

> We must understand how [academic discourse] works, and for that understanding we need to be initiated into the academic discourse community, though we may intend eventually to critique the forms of knowledge which that community offers us (Bizzell "College" 206).

Or:

> Given the notion of interpretive communities, agreement more or less explained itself: members of the same community will necessarily agree because they will see (and by seeing, make) everything in relation to that community's assumed purposes and goals; and conversely, members of different communities will disagree because . . . (Fish 15).

What's interesting about Fish's argument here is how he gives away the game, so to speak, in that first qualifying phrase: *Once given* "the notion of interpretive communities," the rest of his reasoning follows. Similarly, with Bizzell, *once given* that such a thing as "the academic discourse community" exists, then the need to initiate our students into it is plain. But how do we know that such communities in fact exist?

The problem is that such uses of *community* are, in effect, what Austin called *performatives*--statements (like "I promise" or "I name" or "I thee wed") in which saying does indeed make it so. The writer says to his reader: "*We* are part of a certain community; *they* are not"-- and, if the reader accepts, the statement is true. And, usually, the gambit of community, once offered, is almost impossible to decline--since what is being invoked is a community of those in power, of those who know the accepted ways of writing and interpreting texts.

In *community,* then, we find a concept both seductive and powerful, one that offers us a view of shared purpose and effort and that also makes a rhetorical claim on us that is hard to resist. Yet there is also something maddening and vague about the term; for all the talk and scrutiny it has drawn it seems to remain as much a "notion"--hypothetical and suggestive--as ever. For the "communities" to which our theories refer all exist at one remove from actual experience: The University, The Profession, The Discipline, The Academic Discourse Community. They are all literally utopias--nowheres, meta-communities--that are tied to no

particular time or place, and so seem oddly free of many of the tensions, discontinuities and conflicts in the talk and writing that go on everyday in the classrooms and departments of an actual university.[1]

Part of this vagueness stems from the ways that the notion of "discourse community" has come into the study of writing--drawing on one hand from the literary-philosophical idea of "interpretive community," and on the other from the sociolinguistic concept of "speech community," but without fully taking into account the differences between the two. "Interpretive community" is a term in a theoretical debate; it refers not so much to specific physical groupings of people as to a kind of loose dispersed network of individuals who share certain habits of mind. "Speech community," however, is meant to describe an actual group of speakers living in a particular place and time.[2] Thus while "interpretive community" can usually be taken to describe something like a world-view, discipline or profession, "speech community" is generally used to refer more specifically to groupings like neighborhoods or settlements or classrooms.

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1. A growing number of theorists have begun to call this vagueness of *community* into question. See, for instance: Bazerman "Difficulties in Characterizing Social Phenomena in Writing," Bizzell "What is a 'Discourse Community'?" Herzberg "The Politics of Discourse Communities," Swales "Approaching the Concept of Discourse Community," and the 1987 CCCC Roundtable on "Social Research on Writing: What Are We Looking At?"

2. See, for instance, Dell Hymes in *The Foundations of Sociolinguistics*: "For our purposes it appears most useful to reserve the notion of community for a local unit, characterized for its members by common locality and primary interaction, and to admit exceptions cautiously" (51).

What "discourse community" means is far less clear. Most of us who use the term seem to want to keep something of the tangible and specific reference of "speech community"--to suggest, that is, that there really are "academic discourse communities" out there somewhere, real groupings of writers and readers, that we can help "initiate" our students into. But since these communities are not of speakers, but of writers and readers who are dispersed in time and space, and who rarely, if ever, meet one another in person, they invariably take on something of the ghostly and pervasive quality of "interpretive communities" as well.

There have been some recent attempts to solve this problem. John Swales, for instance, has defined "discourse community" so that the common space shared by its members is replaced by a discursive "forum," and their one-to-one interaction is reduced to a system "providing information and feedback." A forum is not a community, though, and so Swales also stipulates that there must be some common "goal" towards which the group is working (2-3).

A similar stress on a shared or collaborative project runs through most other attempts to define "discourse community."[3] Thus while *community* loses its rooting in a particular place, it gains a new sense of direction and movement. Abstracted as they are from almost all other kinds of social and

3. See, for instance, Bizzell, on the need for "empasizing the crucial function of a collective project in unifying the group" ("What" 1), and Bruffee, on the notion that "to learn is to work collaboratively . . . among a community of knowledgeable peers" (646).

material relations, only an affinity of beliefs and purposes, consensus, is left to hold such communities together. The sort of group invoked is a free and voluntary gathering of individuals with shared goals and interests--of persons who have not so much been forced together as have chosen to associate with one another. So while the members of an "academic discourse community" may not meet each other very often, they are presumed to think much like one another (and thus also much *unlike* many of the people they deal with everyday: students, neighbors, coworkers in other disciplines, and so on). In the place of physical nearness we are given like-mindedness. We fall back, that is, on precisely the sort of "warmly persuasive" and sentimental view of *community* that Williams warns against.

One result of this has been, in recent work on the teaching of writing, the pitting of a "common" discourse against a more specialized or "privileged" one. The task of the student is seen as one of crossing the border from one community of discourse to another, of taking on a new sort of language, a new way with words. But I think we need to remember that the borders of most discourses are hazily marked and often travelled, and that the communities they define are thus often indistinct and overlapping. The "unreality" of borders is a recurring theme in both Williams's criticism and fiction.[4] One does not step cleanly and wholly from one community to another, but is caught instead in an always changing mix of dominant,

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4. See Williams' novels *Border Country* and *Second Generation* for interesting images of such unreal and shifting borders, and *Marxism and Literature* for a theoretical discussion of the competing discourses within a community.

counter and emerging discourses. So rather than seeing our job as helping our students move from one community of discourse to another, it seems to me more useful to think of our work as *adding to* or complicating their uses of language.

I am not proposing such addition as a neutral or value-free pedagogy. Rather, I would expect and hope for a kind of useful dissonance as students are confronted with ways of talking about the world that they are not yet wholly familiar with. What I am arguing against, though, is the notion that our students should necessarily be working towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse. It seems to me that they might better be encouraged towards an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own.

To illustrate what such an awareness might involve, let me turn briefly to some student writings. The first comes from a paper on *Hunger of Memory,* in which Richard Rodriguez describes how, as a Spanish-speaking child growing up in California, he was confronted in school by the need to master the "public language" of his English-speaking teachers and classmates. In her response, Sylvia, a young black woman from Philadelphia, explains that her situation is perhaps even more complex, since she is aware of having at least *two* "private languages": A Southern-inflected speech which she uses with her parents and older relatives, and the "street talk" which she shares with her friends and neighbors. Sylvia concludes her essay as follows:

> My third and last language is one that Rodriguez referred to as "public language." Like Rodriguez, I too am having

trouble excepting and using "public language." Specifically, I am referring to Standard English which is defined in some English texts as:

> "The speaking and writing of cultivated people. . .the variety of spoken and written language which enjoys cultural prestige, and which is the medium of education, journalism, and literature. Competence in its use is necessary for advancement in many occupations."

Presently, I should say that "public language" is <u>becoming</u> my language as I am not yet comfortable in speaking it and even less comfortable in writing it. According to my mother anyone who speaks in "proper English" is "putting on airs."

In conclusion, I understand the relevance and importance of learning to use "public language," but, like Rodriguez, I am also afraid of losing my "private identity"--that part of me that my parents, my relatives, and my friends know and understand. However, on the other hand, within me, there is an intense desire to grow and become a part of the "public world"--a world that exists outside of the secure and private world of my parents, relatives, and friends. If I want to belong, I must learn the "public language" too.

The second passage is written by Ron, a white factory worker in central Pennsylvania, and a part-time student. It closes an end-of-the-term reflection on his work in the writing course he was taking.

> As I look back over my writings for this course I see a growing acceptance of the freedom to write as I please, which is allowing me to almost enjoy writing (I can't believe it). So I tried this approach in another class I am taking. In that class we need to write summations of articles each week. The first paper that I handed in, where I used more feeling in my writing, came back with a (√-) and the comment, "Stick to the material." My view is, if they open the pen I will run as far as I can, but I won't break out because I have this bad habit, it's called eating.

What I admire in both these passages is the writer's unwillingness to reduce his or her options to a simple either/or choice. Sylvia freely admits her desire to learn the language of the public world; her "I understand . . . but" suggests, however, that she is not willing to loosen completely her ties to family and neighborhood in order to do so. And Ron is willing to run with the more free style of writing he has discovered, "if they open the pen." Both seem aware, that is, of being implicated in not one but a number of discourses, a number of communities, whose beliefs and practices conflict as well as allign. And it is the tension between those discourses--none repudiated, none chosen wholly--that gives their texts such interest.

"Alongside each utterance . . . off-stage voices can be heard," writes Barthes. We do not write simply as individuals, but we do not write simply as members of a community either. The point is, to borrow a turn of argument from Stanley Fish, that one does not *first* decide to act as a member of one community rather than some other, and *then* attempt to conform to its (rather than some other's) set of beliefs and practices. Rather, one is always *simultaneously* a part of several discourses, several communities, is *always already* committed to a number of conflicting beliefs and practices.

In *The Country and the City,* Williams notes an "escalator effect" in which each new generation of English writers points to a lost age of harmony and organic community that thrived just before their own, only of course to have the era in which they were living similarly romanticized by the writers who came after them. Rather than doing the much the same,

romanticizing academic discourse as occuring in a kind of single cohesive community, I would urge, instead, that we think of it as taking place in something more like a city. That is, instead of presenting academic discourse as coherent and well-defined, we might be better off viewing it as polyglot, as a sort of space in which competing beliefs and practices intersect with and confront one another. One does not need consensus to have community. Matters of accident, necessity and convenience hold groups together as well. Social theories of reading and writing have helped to deconstruct the myth of the autonomous essential self. There seems little reason now to grant a similar sort of organic unity to the idea of community.

The metaphor of the city would also allow us to view a certain amount of change and struggle within a community, not as threats to its coherence, but as normal activity. The members of many classrooms and academic departments, not to mention disciplines, often seem to share few enough beliefs or practices with one another. Yet these communities exert a very real influence on the discourses of their members. We need to find a way to talk about their workings without first assuming a consensus that may not be there. As Patricia Bizzell has recently come to argue:

> Healthy discourse communities, like healthy human beings, are also masses of contradictions. . . . We should accustom ourselves to dealing with contradictions, instead of seeking a theory that appears to abrogate them ("What" 18-19).

I would urge an even more specific and material view of community: One that, like a city, allows for both consensus and conflict, and that holds room

for ourselves, our disciplinary colleagues, our university coworkers *and* our students. In short, I think we need to look more closely at the discourse of communities that are more than communities of discourse alone. While I don't mean to discount the effects of belonging to a discipline, I think that we dangerously abstract and idealize the workings of "academic discourse" by taking the kinds of rarified talk and writing that go on at conferences and in journals as the norm, and viewing much of the other sorts of talk and writing that occur at the university as deviations from or approximations of that standard. It may prove more useful to center our study, instead, on the everyday struggles and mishaps of the talk in our classrooms and departments, with their mixings of sometimes conflicting and sometimes conjoining beliefs and purposes.

Indeed, I would suggest that we reserve our uses of *community* to describe the workings of such specific groups. We have other words to chart the perhaps less immediate (though still powerful) effects of other broader social forces on our talk and writing. Williams's *hegemony* and *counter-hegemony*--the ways in which a culture or world-view is experienced as a lived set of meanings and values, and the ways in which these can be resisted--would be good terms to begin with (see *Marxism* 108-14). Useful too would be his notion of *structures of feeling*: the "particular deep starting points and conclusions"--sort of the social coloring of personal experience--that each of us is born into through being part of a certain time and place (*Marxism* 128-35). And there are of course still other words-- *discourse, language, voice, ideology*--from other vocabularies that we can draw upon. None of them is, surely, without its own echoes of meaning, both suggestive and troublesome. But none, I

believe, carries with it the sense of like-mindedness and warmth that make *community* at once such an appealing and limiting concept. As teachers and theorists of writing, we need a vocabulary that will allow us to talk about certain forces as social rather than communal, as involving power but not always consent. Such talk could give us a fuller picture of the lived experience of teaching, learning and writing in a university today.

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